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# Dance with me in the Heart

It's a partner-dance, by invitation only.

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Painting: Robert Fundis

So you had a pretty good partnership going until your baby morphed into a toddler, and now the dance isn't going quite the way you envisaged? Welcome to the club. And it's a pretty big club with burgeoning membership if that makes you feel any better.

## How come something that starts so promisingly can turn into such a challenge?

When a baby comes into this world she<sup>1</sup> is expecting to continue the partner-dance she began with her mother while in the womb. She is born with two of the partner-dance steps she will need already mastered:

1. She can *give* you clear invitations to join her in the dance.
2. She can *accept* your invitations for the two of you to dance together.

## That's her half sorted, what about yours?

Your half of the dance mirrors your child's half of the dance exactly, which is what you would expect in a partner dance.

1. You can give *her* clear invitations to join you in the dance.
2. You can accept *her* invitations for the two of you to dance together.

If you are anything like most of us, chances are you probably haven't been doing either step very well, but you may not have been doing the first step at all. In our culture it is 'normal' to omit the invitation and then wonder why the toddler is resisting.

## Do unto others

One way to enter into the spirit of this dance is to do unto others what we would like for ourselves. That way we won't step on our junior dancing partner's toes. Better still, if we do what we think would feel respectful for us, we will be teaching our children the skills for respectful partnering at the same time.

## Would I like it?

Stating the obvious, babies and toddlers are human too, and they respond to all of the considerations of respect that you and I appreciate. We are part of a culture that has a very low opinion of children in general, and of toddlers in particular<sup>2</sup>. Nearly all adults - professionals and lay people alike - treat babies and toddlers disrespectfully. We might think we treat young children respectfully, but when we really look at it, most of us don't. And we don't for two reasons. Firstly, our culture has taught us to elevate the head (intellect and reasoning) above the heart (intelligence and empathy). And secondly, most of us have very little idea of children's capabilities, and even fewer ideas on how to support those capabilities to grow and develop. Consequently, we do 'stuff' to babies and children we would not like done to us.

## What sort of stuff?

Adults do things that are intimate to babies and toddlers, and they do them without warning, without consent, often with force, and even with punishment. Here are a just a few examples to get the idea, and after you read each one, ask yourself if you would like to have that done to you:

- Adults pick babies and toddlers from behind.
- Adults pick babies and young children up without telling them.
- Adults pick babies up and young children without asking them if they can.
- Adults pick babies and your children up without waiting for the babies to indicate they are ready to be picked up.
- Adults put hats and jackets on children without asking.
- Adults wipe children's noses and faces without asking (the invitation) and waiting for the child to indicate they are ready (accepting the invitation).
- Adults take things out of children's hands using force. They don't invite the child to give it up and wait for the child to respond.

- Adults force babies and children to eat when they are full.
- Adults pin toddlers and young children down using force for a nappy change.

and on and on and on.... I am guessing you wouldn't like having any of the above done to you, yet the norm for young babies in their first year is to have all manner of things done to them without their consent; especially during the intimate times of feeding, bathing, changing and dressing when they are even more vulnerable.



Painting: Steve Hanks

### **With the baby, never to the baby**

Most babies in our culture are treated as objects to do things *to*, and not as partners to do things *with*. There is a big difference between *to* and *with*. 'To' is the use of 'power over' another, or the dynamic of domination. Doing things *to* others can sow the seeds of bullying, abuse and full scale violence. 'With' is the use of 'power alongside', or the dynamic of partnership and cooperation. Doing things alongside another can sow the seeds for peaceful, creative relationships.

### **That'll be the day**

Then one fine day things change for the baby - she morphs into a toddler. Now that she can talk and walk she will decide she has had enough of doing things without her consent. She will decide she has had enough of being told to, ordered to, made to, and forced to do things. Unless she is treated as a partner from now on she is going to let you know in no uncertain terms that she is well and truly over dancing on your terms all the time. Her autonomy blossoms with her increased mobility and communication skills, and toddlerhood sees the advent of the powerful

energy called will. When you attempt to continue the dance on *your* terms (see the above list for examples) is it any wonder that she says, "No"? Is it any wonder that she runs away when she sees you coming with the face-cloth to wipe her runny nose?

### **Naughty? I don't think so**

Parents and teachers show limited understanding when they label the escaping child as 'naughty'. They say things like, "She's so disobedient, she knew very well what I wanted!" On this last point they are dead-right, she knew only too well; she didn't want her nose wiped, without her consent, yet again. Escaping from a person who won't dance the partner-dance is neither naughtiness nor disobedience. Rather, it shows a high intelligence when a child refuses to play the losing-half in a destructive power dynamic.

### **You can't fool kids or dogs**

My Dad had this saying, "You can't fool kids or dogs". He reckoned dogs and young children suss people out with fail-safe precision. Turns out Dad knew what he was talking about. Research has shown that babies and toddlers read all of you: they read the frequencies you are 'broadcasting' from your mind-brain-body system.<sup>3</sup> They are masters at reading your mood, your intention, your body language, the look in your eye, the dilation of your pupils, the set of your mouth, the curl of your lip... even your heart-rate and your breathing rate is registered by them, and they make the appropriate response according to what you 'are saying'. Now, can you see why the child with the runny nose is running away?

### **Your intent decides**

Babies and toddlers, like children of all ages, read your intent. They *know* if you are centred and confident in your invitations, or if you are all over the place. If you are all over the place, uncentred and unsure, expect a rough ride and don't blame your child. She is just reading what you are putting out and responding accordingly.

When you were in year ten/the fourth form, I bet you had a teacher that your class really tried it on with. You might even have succeeded in sending him/her away for a break-down and seen that as a class victory. In that same year, I bet you had other teachers with whom you wouldn't have even thought about going feral. Those teachers were centred and confident, just the way you will need to be with your toddler. If you are not feeling like that, *act* as though you *are* feeling like that. Because the body, mind and heart work together as a unit, changing any one aspect of behaviour affects the whole, so fake it till you make it.

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## Offering the invitation

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### Giving a clear invitation - there's an art to it

There are simple steps to mastering the art of invitation. When you adopt this gesture your body-mind-heart work together as a unit, and you will learn to recognise 'what you are saying' to your child. I invite you to follow this simple exercise.



#### The invitation: Step 1

Sit in this posture, with your hands resting loosely on your lap. Notice what is happening in your body when you sit like that. Notice

- your jaw
- your shoulders
- the palms of your hands
- your breathing - how fast or how slow is it?
- how deep or how shallow?
- and find one or two words to describe how you are feeling inside.

By putting your hands into the invitation gesture, the whole body system responds. Like other people, you relax, your muscles soften, your facial features become more bliss-like, your heart and breathing rates slow, breathing becomes deeper-fuller.... In the invitation posture, you like other people, will be aware of feeling open, warm, calm, and peaceful.



*Right from the beginning: gentle words along with this gesture of invitation, then pause for the baby to accept.*

A toddler wouldn't even be tempted to run away from somebody who had mastered this simple step of the invitation. Everything about a person in this posture speaks of genuine, peaceful, openness to equal partnership, and the toddler reads that perfectly. Baby whisperers and dog whisperers all begin in this state, because you can't fool kids or dogs.

### Practise makes perfect

If you learned about this gesture when your child was a baby you will know that when you add gentle words of invitation to the gesture, babies say 'yes' to the invitation, every time: "Yes, you can pick me up. Yes you can wipe my nose. Yes, I will lie still while you wipe my bottom. Yes, I will give you the knife. Yes, I will climb into bath".

If you learned this gesture when your child was a baby you can also become quite smug. Unlike others around you, your time with your baby is one of blissful partnership. And then one fine day things change for your baby - she morphs into a toddler.

### What if I say no?

When you offer the invitation to your child, you mightn't think so, but you are offering her a choice:

- She can say yes, or no.
- She can give it to you, or keep it.
- She can come, or run away.
- She can dance with you, or not.

A bright child, blossoming into her toddler-autonomy, will see there are two options to every invitation, and of course she will want to try out the new option to see how that works. Saying 'no' feels very different to saying 'yes', and it certainly gets a different reaction; Mum's Buddha-like peace and calm vapourises instantly.

### The invitation: Step 2

Keeping in mind that the toddler wants a turn at leading the dance, you keep your practised invitation gesture, and you offer your toddler a different choice from the 'yes no' choice she has grown used to. You need to think on your feet now because you will offer the invitation with a 'yes yes' choice:

"Do you want me to lift you into the bath or do you want to climb in yourself? Do you want your water in the bunny cup or the rose cup? Would you like your apple grated or in slices? Do you want your red jarmies or the ones with violet owls on them?"

When she chooses, she exercises her growing autonomy. It doesn't matter which she chooses, with the 'yes yes' option you will still both be heading in the same direction. And then one day things change again and your toddler resists the 'yes yes' invitation.



### **The invitation: Step 3**

We need to go back a bit and revisit the 'do unto others principle'. Toddlers grow more and more like us with every day. As adults, we take a while to 'change gear' and switch to a new idea or activity. If you were writing an email and were asked to come and help with the dishes, it is unlikely you would stop emailing immediately, jump up, click your heels together, and pick up a teatowel. You would probably say something like, "Hold on, I'll just finish this, be there in about 5 minutes". Toddlers are the same. When they have their minds set one way, they do not switch focus instantly either. In the army maybe, but not in your home.

### **Give me one moment in time**

So in step three -

- You keep offering the invitation gesture - it lets your child know that you are genuine in your offer for peaceful partnership.
- You still offer your child a choice - you know that a child who is growing her autonomy wants to make her own choices.
- You add in a time component because you know it takes people a while to switch to a different activity: "Your jarmies are on the couch for you to pop on by yourself before we have dinner, or you can get Daddy to help you." "You need a new nappy, if you bring one when you are ready." "You can choose one bedtime story before your bath or after it." "The lego has to go away tonight. Let me know if you want me to give you a hand, or if you want to do it by yourself."

On average, children respond to invitations within three to five minutes - as long as there is the quiet trust on the part of the adult that they will. Going back to the email example: if I were to stand beside you waiting for you to finish because I didn't trust you to come of your own accord ... you would probably start a second email. For children, on rare occasions the 'shift gear time' can be extend to twenty minutes, but that isn't long to wait for willing acceptance and cooperation.

### **The invitation: Step 4**

Negotiation is an important skill to learn if a child is going to become a peaceful autonomous being. All children learn by playing, and they learn negotiation by playing negotiation. Negotiation can be really tricky skill to master and it takes practise to get really good at it. Guess who they are going to practice with?

### **Help me out here**

When anyone is learning a new skill of their own choosing, they want to try it out over and over again, and the child learning to negotiate is going to want to try that out over and over again - with you. This is when

things can get really messy if you don't realise what is happening. Your child is practising negotiation, she is not very good at it yet, and the choosing has gone round and round and round until she has negotiated herself into a corner. This is your cue to take the lead in the dance:

"You can have milk or milo, those are your choices.

Would you like me to choose for you?"

"Your choice is eat it sitting at the end of the table or around the back. Choose now or I will have to choose for you."

Surprisingly, most times this breaks the deadlock. It as if the child is relieved to have a way out offered to her, and she takes it.

### **And do you know what?**

Some days none of us feel like dancing, no matter how loving the partner. Fortunately, those days are rare, and as the Buddhists say, "This too will pass".

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## **Accepting the invitation**

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### **Listen with your heart**

Every baby comes able to offer you the invitation to join them in the dance, but you have to listen with your heart and *feel* what they are telling you. I know that sounds a bit airy-fairy-hippyish, but all of us are good at reading the unseen (but measureable) frequencies when we tune in. None of us has to be told when someone doesn't like us, we know already, and all of us can sense when something isn't quite right with someone. That 'heart listening', or empathy, is what you'll need to catch your baby's invitations to you, especially in the early weeks and months.

### **One language**

Former mezzo-soprano Priscilla Dunstan, with an 'ear for music', noticed that all babies make the same sounds to communicate their needs<sup>4</sup>. These sounds are the invitation to the adult to join in and partner them. If parents can respond to the invitation when it is first given, the baby's stress levels do not rise. A baby only needs to cry if you don't understand what they 'are saying', then they cry in desperation. Crying is their form of shouting to get you to attend to their needs. They are not making that stuff up as some people will try to tell you.

### **A culture with its fingers in its ears**

The mother and the baby are a unit during pregnancy - everybody knows that. What few in our culture recognise is that mother and baby are still a unit for almost all of the first year after the birth: 40 weeks gestation in the womb, and the next 40 plus weeks exergestation outside of the womb. In that critical

first year, when the baby's brain size will more than double, she has very specific biological and psychological needs she cannot meet for herself. From ethnopaediatrics we know that there are more ways than one to meet these needs, and from ethnopaediatrics we also know that our 'western way' of child rearing is not a good fit for what babies require<sup>5</sup>. So what needs does your baby have that she will ask you to meet?

- She will want to hear your heart-beat and be carried<sup>6</sup>.
- She will want to smell your smell and snuggle her skin on yours.
- Because human breast milk has only 4% fat in it, she will want to feed often<sup>7</sup>.
- She will wake through the night to feed<sup>8</sup>.
- She will want to sleep with you or at least be close enough to register the sound of your breathing<sup>9</sup>.

When you know these things are normal for human babies you can put your fingers in your ears when relatives and friends admonish you telling you, "You are making a rod for your own back. You are spoiling him, you'll be sorry."



*Would you choose to sleep alone if the one you loved, trusted, and felt safe with was in the next room?*

*Painting: Jonathan Ahn*

### **This is your dance**

Your dance with your baby/toddler will be unique to the two of you. Even if you have identical twins, each dance will be unique, so while others can support you, only you and your baby can work out how to dance with elegance.

Every dance starts with an invitation, and every invitation accepted signals a new phase of the dance. When you are learning a new move it might take a while for you both to get the hang of it, but with practise you

will achieve the elegance you seek. May the two of you enjoy every step.

Pennie Brownlee • April 2013

### **Notes and references:**

1. From the choice of pronouns for humans - he and she - I have chosen to use 'she' for a change.
2. Language discloses the things a culture values and doesn't value. Our culture has a pathological attitude toward toddlers. How else could we have coined the term, 'the terrible twos', or written best sellers with these titles, "Taming the Terrible Twos: A Parents' Survival Guide"? "Toddler Taming: A Survival Guide for Parents", "Toddler Taming Tips".
3. **Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain**, Sue Gerhardt
4. Priscilla Dunstan. Go on line, there you will find video-clip of the universal sounds babies make and learn how to read them. Your new understanding will set you up to accept your baby's invitation when it is first offered to you.
5. **Our Babies, Ourselves: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way We Parent**, Meredith F Small
6. James W Prescott has spent his working life researching the developmental needs of humans and other primates. Find him in the archives of the Touch The Future website. The interview 'The Origins of Human Love and Violence & The Developing Brain' will affirm you in your resolve to meet your child's needs regardless of what our culture tells you.
7. **Our Babies, Ourselves: How biology and Culture Shape the Way We Parent**, Meredith F Small
8. **The Womanly Art of Breast Feeding**, the handbook for the La Leche League.



*Painting: Jeffrey Hein*